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Summary

¶1. (SBU) On the first anniversary of its creation, the political party "For a Just Russia," (SR) finds itself recoiling from its greatest challenge thus far: Putin's decision to head the party list for United Russia (YR). In the weeks after Putin's surprise announcement, SR sank in the polls while press reports indicated an exodus from the party of major regional political leaders. Russia's chattering classes began to speak of the party's collapse and there were real doubts that SR would draw enough support in the December 2007 Duma elections to pass the seven percent threshold for entry into the Duma. Party leaders maintain that recent poll data provides hope that Just Russia may limp across the electoral finish line, particularly as popular concern over inflation underscores SR's message of social justice. End summary.

Life After October 2

¶2. (SBU) Putin's October 2 surprise announcement that he would head the YR party list for the December 2 Duma elections hit SR hardest. The party had presented itself as a supporter of Putin, but an opponent of United Russia -- a position that became untenable after October 2. Aleksey Timofeyev, an SR deputy in the St. Petersburg Legislative Assembly, was so dismayed that he called for the dissolution of SR. He thought it would be impossible for SR to remain loyal to Putin and yet oppose the party that Putin was leading into the election. Timofeyev said he had joined SR because its leader, Sergey Mironov, had claimed that Putin would head the party.

¶3. (SBU) SR suffered a drop in the polls in the aftermath of Putin's announcement. Soon after October 2, the Foundation for Public Opinion (FOM), the Levada Center, and VTsIOM indicated that SR would have a difficult time meeting the seven percent threshold necessary to enter the Duma (ref A). In their October 20-21 surveys, the three organizations independently placed SR at four to five percent. These results indicated only YR and the Communist Party (KPRF) would score enough votes to enter the Duma.

¶4. (SBU) SR suffered cadre defections after Putin's announcement, with the press reporting on defections by several highly placed regional leaders including the mayor of Voronezh, the SR party leader in Omsk and the party leader in Novosibirsk. On October 28, the one-year anniversary of the party's founding, 47 regional groups calling themselves "Russian Pensioners" left SR to hold a separate party conference. (Note: The Russian Pensioners Party combined with two other parties to create SR. Its departure could further cripple the party. End note.)

¶5. (U) Since Putin's decision, YR has seemingly gone out of its way to snub SR. It did not invite SR representatives to participate in a series of roundtables to be held on November 7, the anniversary of the October Revolution, although the KPRF, LDPR and Civic Force were included. The organizer of the roundtables attempted to minimize this fact alleging that only competitors of YR were invited.

SR Less Than the Sum of Its Parts

¶6. (SBU) Many of SR's problems are a result of its organizational weaknesses. Aleksey Mukhin of the Center for Political Information described SR to us on November 1 as a Frankenstein party, the product of different political organizations transplanted into a donor body. The party has struggled with scandals and in-fighting since its beginning, particularly in the regions (ref B). Putin's support of SR functioned as an immunosuppressant that kept the different parts from rejecting each other. The drug lost its affect when Putin unexpectedly announced on October 2 that he would lead the candidate list for United Russia.

¶7. (U) Data released September 18 by The Foundation for Public Opinion (FOM) demonstrated spotty regional support for SR. In Siberia support for SR has never exceeded four percent. Embassy trips to Altay Kray and Irkutsk indicated well-organized parties

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in some regions while in Tomsk, the SR seemed very weak. SR enjoys considerable support in diverse regions such as St. Petersburg and Stavropol, but has never become a real player in the in Moscow Region.

¶8. (SBU) Mukhin believes that Putin's October 2 announcement was a serious mistake for the Kremlin. By throwing his support behind United Russia, Putin in effect neutralized SR as a loyal, pro-Kremlin opposition party that could siphon votes from the KPRF.

Mironov Plays the Fool

¶9. (SBU) Embassy contacts also blame serious missteps by SR leader Mironov for the party's problems. A major blow to SR's stature and supposed independence occurred in mid-October when Kremlin pressure forced Sergey Shargunov from SR's national troika. Shargunov is the young leader of the youth movement, URA!, the SR's version of YR's Nashi or Molodaya Gvardiya. In 2002 and 2003 he had made statements critical of Putin. According to Morozov, Sharagunov's past statements were not a secret and clearly not an impediment to his inclusion in the

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national troika. However, in subsequent weeks, after the statements came to light, there was considerable negative reaction, and his name was removed from the national candidate list. Shargunov has since left the party taking URA! with him. Mukhin believed this misstep made Mironov look foolish.

¶10. (SBU) SR also must contend with the well-founded perception that the Kremlin controls who can run on the party's ticket. According to some sources, Yevgeniy Roizman, a current SR Duma Deputy, was evidently excluded from the Sverdlovsk party list at

the behest of the Kremlin, specifically Vladislav Surkov (ref C). Mukhin's contacts in the Kremlin reported it had had purged other names from SR's lists.

The Party is Not Over

¶11. (SBU) However, there are indications that SR is starting to recover from October 2. The latest polls suggest that SR is slowly recovering from its initial drop in ratings. A VTsIOM poll from late October indicated that four parties would make it into the Duma in December: YR, KPRF, LDPR, and SR. SR has regained some ground, but its standing is not clearly assured; the poll predicts that SR will, at best, just scrape by the seven percent threshold. Political commentators concede that popular concern over inflation could enhance the electoral appeal of Just Russia although the Communists are well-placed to capitalize on this vote.

¶12. (SBU) SR leaders insist they have grounds to be cautiously optimistic about their party's chances. Morozov told us on October 31 that he was confident that things would turn out well, but he was clearly concerned about the effects of Putin's decision on his party. While not a death sentence, he said Putin's decision retarded the party's development. Since October 2, SR leaders accept that the party's chief task is survival. Morozov attempted to put the best face on the severe decline in poll numbers, optimistically estimating that SR would win 15 percent of the vote December 2, with the lion's share coming from voters who are currently undecided.

¶13. (SBU) Morozov and Mukhin agreed that most SR defections were members who were angry because they did not make the regional party lists. According to Morozov, the party wanted to make sure that those who ran under the SR banner would be loyal to the party in the Duma. However, potential candidates (and subsequent defectors) such as Yevgeniy Roizman, Sergey Glasyev, and Aleksandr Lebedev could not promise such loyalty. Lebedev, who was originally tapped to head the Moscow list, could only promise to "cooperate" with the party. To the dismay of some party members, the SR leadership transplanted loyal party members from the Moscow leadership to some regions (e.g., Sverdlovsk) in a move to guarantee party loyalty in the Duma.

¶14. (SBU) Mukhin pointed out that most who left had not been happy in the "Frankenstein party." As an example, he pointed to Sverdlovsk where on August 9 the former head of the regional Russian Pensioners Party (RPP) announced that he would abandon SR for the KPRF (ref D). Mukhin said that other party members (including Lebedev) who had political interests that did not coincide with Mironov's would leave. However, he did not anticipate a mass exodus. The rank-and-file remained loyal while the media only reported on the more sensational examples of

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defection.

Comment

¶15. (SBU) One year ago, SR started life as a Kremlin project that fit well into what was perceived to be Putin's plans for an over-determined multi-party system. As the social-democratic party of the left, SR was purportedly designed to ease out the KPRF. However, Putin's alliance with YR has called into question SR's continued viability as a party. It remains to be seen if the Kremlin has a continued interest in SR as a "partner" in a multi-party pro-government coalition.

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